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ABSTRACT

To help children and adolescents learn to read, school librarians and teachers must learn to read with confidence for pleasure and satisfaction and to draw on their experience of the world and their experience with other texts. Having personal enthusiasm, the skills to analyze how a literary work functions, and an understanding of what "succeeds" or "fails" in literary works are critical for communicating enthusiasm and skill to young readers. These qualities also help teachers assist students in finding books that will keep them reading. Librarians and teachers must be practitioners of reading, not simply enablers of reading or transparent conduits for books. The paper describes a course in which undergraduate and graduate education and library students are taught to think, speak, and write about how they read, to clarify the nature of reading, the nature of the book, and the way it should be presented to children. The class requires students to assess their reading experiences with books, particularly exploring whether their reactions to the book are caused by the book-as-object, the reader's personal history, the reader's history as a reader, or the text alone. (Contains 12 references.) (SWC)

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Literarcy for the School Librarian

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I teach courses in children's literature and young adult literature to undergraduate and graduate students in the Faculty of Education at my university, and to graduate students in the School of Library and Information Studies. Among the undergraduate education students, a large number do not see themselves as readers. They are literate in the sense that they can decode the letters and punctuation marks printed on a page and extract information form a text. But they do not read for pleasure, and they have no confidence in their ability to make aesthetic judgements about picture books, story books, or novels. Those few undergraduates and the larger number of graduate students, both in Education and the Library School, who are enthusiastic readers have seldom been asked or shown how to reflect on their own reading, how to sort out what they bring to a text from what that text asks of them.

According to Henriette Dombey, children need to learn to read for pleasure and satisfaction, with confidence. They need to be able to draw on their experience of the world and their experience with other texts, and yet still read tentatively so that they move toward the text rather than preempting it. School librarians and teachers must have these attitudes and strategies themselves, and must be conscious of how they work, if they are to help children and adolescents learn to read.

Personal enthusiasm is crucial if we are to convince children to read. We must also have the skills to analyze how a literary work functions. But an articulated understanding of the sources of our pleasure or dissatisfaction in reading a particular text is at least as important as enthusiasm or technical skills if we are to communicate either enthusiasm or skill to young readers, and if we are to help them find books that will keep them reading.

My experience in the university classroom has convinced me that librarians and teachers need to be shown that they are not simply enablers of reading or transparent conduits for books, but themselves practitioners of reading. They must in some cases first become readers, and in all cases become conscious of their own reading practice if they are to be fully effective as partners in reading for children and young adults. This consciousness can be surprisingly difficult to achieve. This paper draws on my experiences and the experiences of my students, reported in assignments and conversation, as we work together within the broad framework of Aidan Chambers's "critical blueprint" to think, speak, and write about how we read.

Aidan Chambers introduces his critical blueprint as "a number of questions which help clarify the nature of the book and the way we should mediate it with children. These questions may be asked as we read the book, or afterwards, as we contemplate the experience" (174). The questions, as Chambers poses them in chapter XV of *Introducing Books to Children*, are:

1. *What happened to me as I read?*
2. *Which features of the book caused my responses?*
   a. *The book-as-object*
   b. *Responses caused by the reader's personal history*
   c. *Response caused by the reader's history as a reader*
   d. *Response caused by the Text alone*
3. *What does this book ask of readers if they are to enjoy what it offers and discover the Text's potentialities?*
4. *Why is this book worth my own and the children's time and attention?*
5. *Which would be the most appropriate way of introducing this book to the children I have in mind?*
6. *What do I know about the background of this book--about its author, how it came to be written, or the place where it is set, and so on --that might interest the children and stimulate their desire to read?*
7. *Are there books by the same author, or by other authors, which relate to this one and which the children have already read, or perhaps ought to read before reading this one? And are there books which follow on naturally from this one?*

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When I give the critical blueprint to my students as the framework for our class discussions and for a written assignment, I present a slightly altered version, because my objective is to clarify the nature of the reading as much as it is to clarify the nature of the book. The two processes are, or course, inseparable, but I focus on clarifying the nature of the particular readings not only as a means to understanding the nature of the text, but as a pedagogical end in itself.

Questions 5 and 7 are omitted because I want to dislodge my students from their mental position as mediator in the library or classroom and get them to think about their own reading. Question 6 should, perhaps, vanish for the same reason. But gossip about a book or its author is such a delightful, and inevitable, part of any book discussion, that it seems counterproductive to leave it out. Question 2 is simply reworded to achieve a parallel structure and clarify the logic.

Depending on the level of the course, we discuss somewhere between eleven and eighteen books together during the semester. In the undergraduate course I also ask the students to choose one of two titles and work through the first two questions of the critical blueprint on their own. The results are handed in as a written paper before those books are discussed in class. After the class discussion, the students write their responses to the remaining questions, and reflect on their responses to the first two questions in the light of the general discussion. My instructions for the written assignment read, in part:

In this paper I am looking for evidence of thought and engagement with the text: you do not have to like the book. You must demonstrate that you are conscious of your responses to the book and of their sources, and that you have an understanding of how the book works.

In what follows I will go through questions 1 and 2, the response questions, of the critical blueprint as I use it with my classes, drawing on my own experiences and those of my students to illustrate each one. I hope that anyone who already knows the Chambers version will find this interesting as further evidence of how well these questions work for framing a discussion of a text. For those who don't know the Chambers version, it may serve as an introduction to a very useful way of thinking about books and reading.

1. What happened to me as I read?

To answer this question, we "tell the story of our reading" (Chambers 174). The unpracticed response is usually one short comment, often focussed on the book rather than on the reader: it was boring, I thought it was dumb; I loved it; it was funny; it was too scary; or (most discouragingly), it was o.k., I guess. Any of these one-liners can be unpacked at least a little, and some of them a great deal more than that.

"It was boring" could mean that the reader started the book with a complete lack of enthusiasm and only because it was going to be discussed in class the next week. She tried conscientiously to pay attention throughout the first chapter, hoping to get interested, but the book failed to catch her fancy, and she skimmed through the rest of it just to get some idea of the events and characters. Or it could mean "I got confused with all that stuff about the diary in chapter one, and so the whole thing didn't really make much sense to me."

"It was o.k., I guess" could introduce a variety of reading stories. The reader may have quite enjoyed the book except for the ending, which was a disappointment. Or he liked all the details about running an antique shop, but found the main plot line too predictable. Or she liked the exciting action when it finally did happen, but there were too many slow parts. Or he found the book completely boring, and didn't actually finish it, but knows the person he's talking with thinks it's a marvelous book.

The longer version of "I loved it!" turned out, in one case, to be "I decided to read the first chapter while I was warming up the van, and the next thing I knew I had finished the book and the van was REALLY warm, and I thought, Oh no, I was supposed to be thinking about the book as I was reading!"

The "Oh no" serves as a reminder that watching oneself read with pleasure is an acquired skill. It demands entering into a state of mild schizophrenia. Naive readers will have to reconstruct the story of their readings after the fact, if they become absorbed in their book. And the sophisticated reader may choose sometimes to lose herself completely in a story.

In a natural, unstructured discussion, the initial descriptions of responses to a text would have causes attached to them: "I loved it because I'm a fantasy reader, and this book reminded me of my favorite McKillip novel." "I hated it because I knew right from the beginning that the dog would die at the end, and my dog got run over last summer and I didn't want

to go through that again." "I thought it was dumb because X had too much to bear, life was too hard for her, I didn't think that was fair." But part of the point of following the critical blueprint is to learn to separate out the different sources of our response to a text. And so, admittedly artificially, the "because" is left out of our answers to the first question in class discussions, saved up until we get to the four parts of the second question.

2. What caused my responses?

In answering question 2, the challenge is to figure out which of the four sources suggested by Chambers gave rise to the reader's responses.

a. The book-as-object.

Chambers reminds us that books have shape, weight, texture, smell, mobility, and visual appeal (174). Publishers ask us to judge a book by its cover, and we cannot help doing so. I bought the Tor paperback of Jane Yolen's *Sister Light, Sister Dark* with great anticipation because I like her books very much, but the dreadful cover illustration has forever shadowed my response to this particular story of hers. I only realized it when I tried to explain my dissatisfaction with the novel to someone who knows and loves the book, and who countered all my criticisms about the text successfully until at last I realized that it was a part of the paratext, the picture on the cover, that was the source of an initial dislike that has never been completely dispelled by the story between the covers.

One of the clearest examples of the power of the book-as-object to influence a reading came to me a month ago, in a group discussing Annie Dalton's young adult fantasy novel, *Out of the Ordinary*. Two members of the discussion group didn't like the book, and three, including me, did. The two who didn't like it had read the American edition, the other three the British edition.

The American HarperKeypoint paperback has a realistic, cheerful illustration on the cover. The only hint of fantasy is the pink castle rising out of fantasyland clouds in the background. The print is very large, large enough to seem intended for young children, and there is almost no right margin at all, so that the pages look unbalanced and uncontained. Because of the large print, the book is 273 pages long, 100 pages longer than the British edition. The page numbers are emphasized by being centered at the bottom of each page.

The British Teens-Mandarin paperback has a darker, more powerful cover that clearly signals fantasy. It reminded some of the readers in the discussion group of Alan Garner's *The Owl Service*. The print is small, standard paperback size. While the margins are not generous, they seem adequate because of the small print. The titles are enclosed in an intricate ornament and on the table of contents and the first page of each chapter are set in a broad left margin. In short, the book looks more attractive, more interesting, and more grownup.

There are other differences in the paratext, as well. The page preceding the title page in the American edition carries an excerpt from the text. The same page in the British edition has a similar passage as well, somewhat shorter, but it is followed by three laudatory quotations from reviews of the book. Certainly the one from *Books for Keeps* and the one by Jan Mark in *TES* would be likely to predispose an adult reader familiar with the world of children's literature to like the book. Finally, the publisher's description on the back of the American edition gives away more of the plot than the British one does.

It would be foolish to claim that the book-as-object was the only trigger for the two different sets of responses to this novel. But I could feel my liking for the book fade a little as I looked at the American edition for the first time during the discussion, and one of the members of the group, an enthusiastic fantasy reader, wondered aloud as she looked at the British edition whether her tepid response would not have been warmer if she had read that version. We all agreed that the British edition was a good deal more attractive.

b. The reader's personal history.

Chambers writes that "With children, the teacher's job is to help clarify the difference between the experience offered by the book and the same experience known to the reader personally" (177). I've learned that this is also the teacher's job with university students.

Helen Fogwell Porter's *january, february, june or july* is one of the novels on the reading list of my young adult materials course. It is a Canadian book, set in St. John's, Newfoundland. The protagonist is a fifteen-year-old girl from a poor working class family who becomes pregnant and has an abortion. One of my students, Diane, objected strenuously to the book, not because of the subject matter, but because, she said, it wasn't realistic: it wouldn't have been so simple to get an abortion in St.

John's, and the girl would have been far more disturbed by the experience than Diane thought the novel showed her to be.

Diane grew up a Catholic in the Maritimes, and had worked as a teacher in Newfoundland. She certainly realized that she was measuring the book against her personal experience, but she had no real understanding of how her own history was coloring her reading. The rest of the class argued vigorously that within the world of the story as it was crafted by the author, the abortion and its effect on the girl were entirely convincing, and not as straightforward as Diane thought they were. Diane was not persuaded by the class discussion. Because this matter touched her so nearly, she was unable to make the distinction between her world and the world of the book. But the other participants had an effective lesson in the importance of recognizing personal history as a source of response to certain features of a book.

A reader's personal history can also be a gate into the world of the book, instead of a barrier to what Chambers calls "the text-intention" (177). Another student in the same class had grown up in St. John's. She could hear every Newfoundland cadence and intonation in the dialogue, and knew every building and street corner mentioned in the story. She felt completely at home in the world created by the author, and was happy to be there. As a sophisticated reader, she was aware that part of her admiration for the novel came from her delight in its accurate repre-sentation of a place she knew well.

c. The reader's history as a reader.

It is easy to agree with Chambers that "In one sense, all books are made out of other books and all our reading is dependent on all we have read before" (177). Parodies are, perhaps, the most obvious example of this dependency. Readers of Robert Munsch's *The Paper Bag Princess* are expected to know that in fairy tales princes usually rescue princesses, and that the author has done it the other way around in his story on purpose. A reader who is unacquainted with the form of parody and the content of our best known fairy tales will read the story very differently from one who is equipped to get the joke.

All stories work according to conventions the reader has to know or be able to figure out, and agree to abide by for the duration of the story. Stories can also call up other fictional worlds, sometimes by explicit reference to a specific title or character, as *Little Women* does with *Pilgrim's Progress*, and sometimes through similarity, a kind of relatedness, Chambers's "family tree". Intertextuality need not be deliberately created on the author's part. The links can be even be made backward, from a book that is older in my reading history but written after the book that reminds me of it. Someone who has read widely will have a large literary repertoire to draw on, and a good chance of having the requisite background knowledge and understanding a particular book demands. But "history as a reader" must not be defined by books alone. Television programs, movies, stories told by our parents or grandparents, music videos are all narratives that readers bring to enrich or confuse their readings of a particular text.

When I first read Susan Cooper's *The Dark Is Rising*, I found myself bringing memories of Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, with its spell of "oak, ash and thorn" to the story, and felt myself to be in a pleasantly familiar place. The character of the Walker was made more potent by the dimly remembered figures of the Wandering Jew and the Flying Dutchman. A jumbled composite of all the Arthurian stories I ever read formed a misty backdrop for the whole thing, and from at least a dozen other texts I knew about the sun sign and the Celtic cross, the power of iron and running water to ward against magic. Although I can see the flaws in the novel, I reread it with pleasure, largely, I think, because of these echoes it sets ringing in my head.

Many of my students love the book, too, and few of them bring the old fashioned reading history to it that I do. John read a great deal of popular fantasy, especially that drawing on Celtic myths. He felt himself to be an expert in the genre and read Cooper with the confidence of someone prepared to judge. Tolkien readers in the class usually love the novel, and aren't surprised to hear that Cooper had been a student of Tolkien's. Bob said he liked the book so much because he was a *Startrek* fan, and the book had a lot in common with that television series. Bob was delighted by his own enthusiasm for a complex book because he was not, by his own admission, a reader, and lacked confidence in his ability to enjoy a novel. I watch *Startrek* myself, but I had never thought of it in connection with Cooper's novel, and I still don't. But I can see how Bob links the two. Kathy, also a *Startrek* watcher, couldn't see the connection. She didn't like the Cooper book because it brought fantasy into the everyday

world, while *Startrek* is safely set in the future. She could understand the purpose of the characters in *Startrek* because their aim is constant and explicit, but she could never figure out what the forces of the Light in *The Dark Is Rising* really hoped to achieve. (Nor can I, for that matter.)

There are always students who don't like the book. Some simply dislike the heroics of epic fantasy. Others, who are unfamiliar with fantasy or don't read it by choice, are confused by the time slips and either lose confidence in themselves or become irritated when they try to figure out the mechanism, but can't do so because the author doesn't tell them enough. In both cases, the readers are bumped out of the world of the story by their response. Some dislike the book because all the symbolism makes them uneasy. They see it, but they don't understand what it means and can't tolerate the uncertainty of not knowing. On the other hand, there are readers who know they are missing something but read right past the gaps, become absorbed in the story in spite of them. They sense rather than understand the power of seventh sons, of wood and iron, and fire and water, and will have a richer context for these symbols at the next encounter. And this is a very good thing. If we responded favorably only to the familiar, we would stand still. As my friend Margaret Mackey puts it, we become readers one book at a time.

d. The text alone.

If we have identified the layers of responses that are provoked by the text but come from outside it, and if we can put them aside, which isn't always possible, then we can come to responses caused by the text alone. At this level we can see what Chambers calls "the author's storytelling tactics" (181). My colleague Jon Stott uses an analogy to the "instant replay" of sports broadcasts on television. Lemieux has a breakaway and seems about to score, but the goalie makes an unbelievable save. How did he do that? If we're watching on television instead of at the rink, we can see that play again, from different camera angles, in slow motion, with commentary from the announcers, and appreciate exactly what happened.

As a reader I am the camera, the director, and the announcer all in one. I can stop the action, while the crowd is cheering and the players circle around the rink exchanging congratulatory thumps, and take another look. How does Cooper keep up the feeling of suspense, even though she has told me at the beginning that nothing really bad can happen to Will, and even though I've read the book four times? Why, on the fifth reading, am I still turning the pages as quickly as I can, racing through the story to see what happens?

Discussing responses caused by the text alone usually requires a closer look at the text. Lisa, who found Philippa Pearce's *Tom's Midnight Garden* confusing on first reading, liked the story a great deal better when she reread it to answer this question. Because she was paying close attention to the text, she allowed herself to be guided by the author in a way that she hadn't the first time through. She listened to what Pearce had to say, and realized that the clock striking thirteen always marked the transition to the fantasy world of the garden, and that the furnishings of the hall changed with the shift from real time to fantasy time. She also noticed that some words were printed in italics, and that they gave her clues that helped her sort things out. She hadn't found Tom's growing belief that the garden was real convincing, but this time she registered his brother Peter's belief, and eventually it persuaded her that the garden did exist.

Susan wrote the following in her introduction to her paper on *Tom's Midnight Garden*. This is the second draft of this paper. I hated *Tom's Midnight Garden*. However, by the time I completed the questions and [the section on] the responses caused by the text, I changed my mind. I once again took the book, curled up on my bed and reread it. I allowed myself to just listen to the story and forget all the assumptions I had made regarding the story. I ignored the fact that *Tom's Midnight Garden* was a fantasy--a genre I hate!! I now see the story differently. Although I can't say I love this book, I did enjoy it and would certainly recommend it. The next time someone recommends a fantasy book to me, I will be far more open minded about reading it.

As this excerpt suggests, the process of answering the question about responses caused by the text alone can be a very revealing one. It is also the most difficult of the questions to answer, for two reason. First, it demands an effortful reading, one that listens to what the writer has to say, rather than asserting what she ought to have said (Fisher 129). Second, the students frequently fall into what I call the literary elements trap. Because they have little confidence in their ability to think critically about a text, and because thev have been con-

ditioned to look for the one right answer, they fall back on describing plot, characterization, theme, mode, style, setting, and point of view from an objective distance, in a way that has nothing to do with their responses to these elements. As a result, the answer to question 2 has no relation whatsoever to the answer to question 1, "What happened to me as I read?"

One student, Heather, was an extreme example of this reluctance to engage the text. She said trying to find the sources of her response in the text made her feel as though she were floating on a feather on the Saskatchewan River and couldn't swim. She was happy to talk about her reading history and personal history, but she simply could not overcome her uneasiness about looking at the text as a source of ***her*** responses.

Aside from the engagement with the text and the focus on one's own reading demanded by question 2nd, the greatest challenge the critical blueprint poses is that of separating and sorting out the different sources of the reader's responses. This is, of course, an artificial situation, part of an exercise. An informal discussion is not structured in this way; no one interrupts in midsentence to say "Wait, that belongs in question 2c, history as a reader." Nor do the sources operate discretely: for the reader who is deeply attached to her pets and won't read animal stories because the dog always dies, personal history and history as a reader come together in her reluctance to read *Shiloh*. For me, looking at the cover of *Out of the Ordinary* and thinking of *The Owl Service*, my history as a reader and the book-as-object operate together as sources of a response. But it is important to practice the separation because it is the best way to discover that there are different sources, to learn a part of how complex the process of reading is.

My students learn to use the critical blueprint in class discussion. At first they are hesitant, afraid of giving a wrong or stupid answer. Gradually they come to trust the process and realize that even a mistake, either in following the blueprint or in following the author's codes, is instructive once it is identified, and therefore a contribution to the discussion. The diversity of responses to a given title becomes something we all look forward to, and a minority opinion ("I guess I'm the only one who didn't think this book was wonderful") is welcomed for the insights it will bring. The students often persuade their roommates, parents, spouses, children, nephews and nieces to read the books on the reading list and carry on the book talk at home. They bring interesting excerpts from these conversations to class, contributing these new readings and responses as data for our exploration.

Often, their own readings of a text are enriched by what other readers made of it. Mine always are. Sometimes their readings are radically changed by the comments of other readers, and they are opened to something new. One student reported the following about the class discussion of *Tom's Midnight Garden*.

> My initial interpretation of the book was extremely negative which stemmed from my lack of interest and familiarity with this particular genre. . . A discussion of the book is what turned it around for me. My peers had not experienced the same frustrations and negative reactions as I had. Instead, they had enjoyed it. Their comments suggested that this book was worthwhile reading. This new insight aroused my interest and curiosity. Not being able to share in their enthusiasm made me feel left out. I wanted to experience the book as they had. With this motivation, I returned to the book a second time to see what I had missed.

Those who have read little in the past benefit from the larger repertoires of the experienced readers, and see demonstrated how reading builds on reading. The enthusiasm of those who love to read is persuasive, too.

This is important, because so many of my students, especially the Education undergraduates, are self-confessed nonreaders. It is to their credit that they take the children's literature course to try to compensate for that: they are trying to make up for what they know will be a lack in their work with children. A number of students tell me at the end of the course that they have learned to read for pleasure again, or for the first time. The value given to their own responses, the creativity of the discussions with a community of readers, the thinking they have to do, give them confidence as readers.

Perhaps I am beginning to sound like a snake oil saleswoman here. I do admit my missionary fervor. But I don't mean to suggest that the process is completely successful. One student, Adam, was an inexperienced reader who found it impossible work within the frame of the critical blueprint. He told me that

thinking or writing about himself made him very uncomfortable. He never overcame his reluctance, and became the only student ever to fail the written assignment on the critical blueprint. Another student, an experienced reader with a history of academic success, could not accept the notion that more than one interpretation of a text was possible. She continued to argue for a correct answer, which she assumed would be hers, and I was never able to diffuse her frustration with the discussions. But over the six years that I have taught children's literature and young adult literature courses, I have become increasingly persuaded that the most useful thing to make happen in the classroom is to show readers in action.

Even if the critical blueprint doesn't turn students into enthusiastic readers, it gives them the opportunity to become conscious readers. It also shows them how diverse individual responses to a text can be, and what the sources of that diversity are. This is, I think, of enormous significance for teachers and librarians. Most of the students I meet still have the notion that there is a correct reading, a right answer. I am not arguing for a laissez-faire approach that gives free reign to subjectivity. I agree with Margery Fisher: "The book comes first. Children must learn to come toward the book, not the other way around" (129). The point of the critical blueprint is precisely to encourage that.

Reading to find out how the story works is quite a different thing from reading to pass a test. Student study guides in novel units still ask questions like "What does Scout find in the tree in Radley's front yard?" "What age are the children now?" "Does Scout want to be a lady?"[1] The answers to questions like these won't give the reader anything but a grade. Worse, for uncertain readers they get in the way of reading. At the every least they insist on an efferent rather than an aesthetic reading, and are guaranteed to make reading a chore rather than a pleasure.

Something like the critical blueprint shows teachers and librarians an alternative to twenty years of novel units on *To Kill a Mockingbird*. If they have worked with the critical blueprint as students themselves, they have learned a model for teaching literature that does not depend for its authority on the answers in the Teacher's Study Guide or in their notes from university literature courses. They have also learned from their own experience, or from seeing it in others, that the young readers they are guiding can move beyond the familiar, learn to like something new, that they can read a little beyond themselves, be confused and still be absorbed in the story. They have seen that matching a book with a reader must take into account a great many variables.

This approach to the teaching and study of literature is certainly not new. Louise Rosenblatt's *Literature as Exploration* was first published in 1938. The scholarly conversations about it have continued all through the succeeding 55 years, and Farrell and Squire's *Transactions with Literature. A Fifty-Year Perspective* is a useful collection of articles with "a point of view that embraces both the reader and the literary work while focusing on the transaction between the two" (vii). David Buckingham in his introduction to *Reading Audiences: Young People and the Media* expands the discussion to forms of narrative other than the printed novel. Deanne Bogdan considers the implications for the justification and censorship of literature texts. These are a very few of the writers who have illuminated this approach and reinforced my sense of its usefulness. But year after year my students have demonstrated to me that practice still lags behind theory, and so I have offered my experience as a part of the conversation.

Endnotes

1. These questions are taken from a teaching kit on *To Kill A Mockingbird*, put out by The Perfection Form Company in 1960, which I found in the Education Library at my university. To judge by the stamps on the due date slips, this kit is still very much in use.

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